Prepared Remarks by U.S. Attorney Preet Bharara
Sikh Foundation of Canada Centennial Gala
April 23, 2016

INTRODUCTION

- Thank you to Dr. Davindra Singh for inviting me to be here tonight.

- I am incredibly honored to be here tonight and accept this award. And it is particularly special because my parents are here with me.

- It is very special to be honored by the Sikh Foundation.

    - I often joke about the many religions in my family: my children have one Hindu grandparent, one Sikh grandparent, one Muslim grandparent, and one Jewish grandparent.

    - Which I think – if I'm doing the math correctly—makes them Episcopalean. I'm not just a fan of Springsteen, I like bhangra too.

- Why I am I here? I am the token international guy.

- Someone once made the mistake of asking me, ‘What again is your jurisdiction exactly?’ and I said, ‘Are you familiar with Earth?’

- I am banned from Russia. I am not so welcome in Switzerland. For a time I was not welcomed in India, Jamaica, Honduras, and Colombia.

- So, it is nice to feel so welcomed here in Canada.

WORKING WITH CANADA

- We work closely with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP).

- Chehib Esseghaier and Raed Jaser, two Canadian men, were convicted in 2015 in Canada for multiple terrorism offenses relating to a plot to bomb rail tracks on a land bridge over the Canadian border, with the goal of causing the passing train to fall, thereby killing the passengers on board.

- The case was built through the work of an undercover law enforcement officer (the “UC”), who was working with the FBI.

- *The UC established a relationship with Esseghaier, and then by extension Jaser, and over the course of several months, conducted a number of recorded meetings with Esseghaier and Jaser in Canada and (in Esseghaier's case) in New York City.*

- *The UC testified for several days at Esseghaier and Jaser's trial in Toronto, providing the most compelling and important evidence of their guilt. Esseghaier and Jaser were both sentenced to life imprisonment.*

- There are other cases as well – financial fraud, cyber cases too.

COMING TO AMERICA

- Harjit Singh Sajjan, like me, came from a humble background in India. It is awe inspiring to see what he has accomplished and continues to do.

- For my part, it is the great honor and privilege of my life to serve as United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York. I have a feeling that no matter how long I live and no matter what else I do, it will remain the great honor of my life.

- For my own part, my family's journey has taught me something about history and humility and the American dream.

- At my swearing-in about 7 years ago, I talked a bit about my father's reaction to my nomination. You see, for my whole life, my Dad was a studiously unemotional man.

- But in the months leading up to my confirmation, he sometimes seemed a bit overwhelmed by the prospect of his son becoming the United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York.

- But perhaps that was understandable for a man like my father, who was born 75 years ago halfway across the globe, who grew up in a small village, who lost his mother while still a toddler, who lived for a time in a home without even basic plumbing, and who became the first member of his family ever to go to college.

- He brought our family to this part of the world some 45 years ago, with only a few dollars in his pocket and a hope in his heart that we would have a better life in this country and that his children might, one day, amount to something in America.

- And so, when you are an Indian immigrant who becomes a naturalized citizen at age 12, who later becomes chief counsel to a United States Senator, and who later still is nominated by the first African-American president to become the first Asian-American U.S. Attorney in Manhattan, you begin to believe that anything is possible in our countries.

- And when you are then confirmed as U.S. Attorney even though your name is Preetinder Bharara; when you understand that your photo will nonetheless one day hang on that wall alongside people with names like Henry L. Stimson and Whitney North Seymour, Jr., and Robert M. Morgenthau; when your father came from nothing and you have everything, then you know anything is possible in our countries.

- In fact, I sometimes feel that I will not have enough breaths in my body to give back what I feel I owe my country.

- So, I understand and appreciate a family's pride and a community's excitement when one of its own makes a mark, like Minister Sajjan.

- It's the historical arc – leading ever upward – that every immigrant hopes his family will draw.

- The dream that every child—even a poor or orphaned or immigrant child—can rise higher than that child's parents could ever have imagined:

BUT

- But at the end of the day, whether you are lucky enough to wield a subpoena or command a military, neither I nor anyone else will ultimately be judged on the fact that they were the first Indian this or Sikh that.

- In my view, there is not necessarily much achievement in merely securing a high position. It is what you do when you get there what counts.

- It is the quality of one's work and the strength of one's leadership and the power of one's vision that ultimately establishes everyone's place as either a pioneer or a placeholder.

- And there are people all over the world who have never been appointed or elected to anything who have been the most consequential champions of justice and catalysts of progress.

- That said, I do suppose that there is one relevant aspect of having a certain ethnic background—a first-time achievement within a community is something like a mini-moon landing. It expands horizons.

- It signals something to young people who may not yet know that their dreams can become reality too—even though they may have a funny name or an exotic heritage or a misunderstood religion.

- It is the ripple effect and power of an ethnic, racial, or religious first:
  - If Barack Obama can do it, then maybe I can too.
  - If Preet Bharara can do it, then maybe I can too.
  - If Harjit Singh Sajjan can do it, then maybe I can too.

- But even this heartwarming idea is subject to limitation—because, ideally, one should be capable of being inspired without regard to common ancestry or ethnicity, because common humanity trumps all.

- Consider, after all, that an American named King was inspired by an Indian named Gandhi, who had himself been inspired by an American named Thoreau, who had himself been inspired by an Indian text called the Bhagavad Gita.

- That is a cycle of inspiration that transcends race and religion and creed and color; and the mere fact of that cycle is deeply inspiring, if you pause to think about it for even a moment.

- To me, the most important relevance of being an Indian immigrant—in terms of how I think about my work and my career and my priorities—is this: It drives a deep feeling of obligation to give back to the country that gave me and my family so much.

- I know this can sometimes sound corny. But I agree with the adage that to whom much is given, much is expected.

- And I think that principle, in some ways, goes double for recent immigrants.

- Our families chose to come west; not everyone had that choice.

- They chose to come here on the promise of a better life and, if you are sitting in this very nice hotel ballroom, by definition, that promise was fulfilled.

- And it is just too soon for people like us to take our comforts for granted.

CONCLUSION

- In my office, every Assistant U.S. Attorney is given a framed copy of a passage written by one of my predecessors, Whitney North Seymour, Jr., when he was the U.S. Attorney more than 40 years ago.

- Seymour offers a word of advice aimed at the hearts of young idealists upon the commencement of their public service careers.

- And I think it applies whether you live in Canada, in America, in India, or anywhere else on Earth.

- And what Seymour preaches is this: "One's basic credo should agree with Thomas Paine's: 'The world is my country, all mankind are my brethren, and to do good is my religion.'"

- And so, whatever faith you otherwise profess—whether you are Sikh, Hindu, Muslim, Jewish, Christian, or non-believing, I hope that you also maintain faith in Thomas Paine's credo, and I pray that doing good becomes part of your religion as well.